

# The terrible twos and threes: your child's behavioural development



Centre for Community Child Health

May 2016



**Children go through different behavioural stages as they grow and develop. It can be useful to know the sorts of behaviour that might be coming up.**

If you have concerns about your child's development, discuss your concerns with your child and family health nurse.

## **Babies and toddlers (up to 3 years old)**

In the first three years, your child is developing all sorts of new skills and abilities, which all have an influence on the way that they behave.

Your child will start to copy their peers and to take turns with others when they're playing. Your child is developing their independence, but balancing that with staying close to you.

## **Preschoolers (4–5 years old)**

By preschool, your child is developing an understanding of social rules and greater empathy. At the same time, you can expect to see an increase in prosocial behaviour (for example, offering to share food) and a decrease in any aggressive behaviour.

## **Common early years behaviour**

There are some common challenging types of behaviour that you might experience with your child. These include whining and pestering, tantrums, biting, and swearing.

Parents feeling concerned about their child's behaviour is quite common and peaks when your child is around 3 years old.

### **Whining and pestering**

Whining and pestering are common in early childhood and can be challenging, but are not usually cause for serious concern.

### **Tantrums**

Tantrums are a natural part of growing up and not usually cause for serious concern. Typically, they start to diminish naturally once your child reaches 3 years and older.

### **Biting**

Biting behaviour and its meaning change with age, ranging from testing new teeth and exploring reactions when your child is a baby, to behaviour that corresponds with the peak in tantrums.

### **Swearing**

For most young children, swearing is a way to get a reaction from adults and can be successfully managed by ignoring the behaviour.

If you are feeling frustrated or angry about your child's behaviour, or it's worrying you so much that you're skipping activities and outings, it's a good idea to talk to your child and family health nurse or GP about things that you can do.

# Learning to balance emotions



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We often think about physical aggression as being something that's a problem in young men. But the foundation for physically aggressive behaviour is usually laid in the early years through children's interactions with adults, and observing how relationships between adults work.

As a parent, there are steps that you can take to help your child to develop a strong foundation for their development, and learn the social and emotional skills they will need to manage strong feelings, without being physically aggressive.

## Achieving emotional balance

Your developing child will experience the full range of human emotions, from anger and sadness to joy. However, being able to express and experience that emotional range is not enough for development – your child also needs to develop the skills that let them feel strong emotions and then return to a sense of balance.

To help your child to learn how to feel strong emotions and come back to a balanced state, there are things you can do:

- Sometimes the way your child responds emotionally might seem over the top – too much anger or too much crying in proportion to what has happened. Your child can learn how to manage the way they feel when you fully accept every kind of emotion that they express, and avoid labelling some emotions as good and some as bad.
- By providing consistent structure, guidance and limits (sticking to boundaries in the face of pestering or whining) you help your child to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the way they feel.
- Each child has their own particular temperament. Get to know your child's temperament so that you can safely help them to expand their emotional range.

Experiencing negative emotions in a safe environment, where children do not feel judged, allows them to develop the skills to express their feelings without becoming overwhelmed.